

Postmedia News

Feds gets failing grade for drinking-water safety

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OTTAWA - A patchwork system of drinking-water standards across the country has left some Canadians at risk of contracting potentially deadly diseases, according to a new report.

The assessment from an environmental watchdog gave decent and good grades to several provinces, including top marks to Ontario and Nova Scotia, but reserved its harshest critique for the federal government, which received a failing grade.

Vancouver-based Ecojustice says the findings in its third report on drinking-water management in Canada show safety gaps still exist more than a decade after lax water-management standards contributed to the deaths of seven people in Walkerton, Ont.

The report, titled Waterproof 3, says the federal government has done little to improve drinking water conditions, including those in First Nations communities. It also cited a reluctance to create rigorous national drinking water standards.

"From 2001 to 2006, there was clear improvement in drinking water standards across the country. Not only was it getting better, it was getting significantly better," report author Randy Christensen said in an interview. "What we found most surprising now is that between 2006 and 2011, that momentum has been lost."

Most of the previous improvements were a direct result of the Walkerton inquiry, Christensen said. Without improvements, he said there is a "risk of some of those lessons being forgotten."

"Each jurisdiction should be reviewing the Walkerton recommendations . . . and coming up with a plan," Christensen said.

The report identified a serious problem in First Nations communities.

Under questioning Tuesday in the House of Commons, Minister of Aboriginal Affairs John Duncan said the government plans to reintroduce legislation designed to improve drinking and waste water systems in First Nations communities.

The Tories introduced the Safe Drinking Water for First Nations Act in the Senate in 2010, but it died when the election was called in March.

"We will be reintroducing First Nations water legislation soon to create endorsable standards and guide investments. We are getting the job done," Duncan said.

The report says government cuts, climate change and unprotected source water are the biggest emerging threats to the country's drinking water system.

The Ecojustice report, which is released every five years, evaluates each province, territory and the federal government's performance on treatment and testing requirements, drinking-water quality standards, source-water protection, and transparency and accountability.

The federal government received an 'F' on the report card, the only failing grade handed out.

Ontario received an 'A'; Nova Scotia an A-; Manitoba and New Brunswick each received a B+; Newfoundland and Labrador received a B; while Prince Edward Island, Quebec and Saskatchewan each received a B-.

At the bottom of the list were British Columbia (C+), Alberta (C-), the Northwest Territories (C), the Yukon (D+) and Nunavut (D).

Alberta also received a scathing critique in the report, which said that standards for treatment and testing have "remained static" for five years.

The report expected those at the bottom of the list to improve their standing in the coming years, especially in the Northwest Territories, where an "ambitious review of its water laws" is underway.

An "ambitious water law overhaul" is also underway in B.C., the report notes, but doesn't deal with the protection of water sources, a problem because B.C. is home to the lowest standards in the country.

The full report is available at (www.ecojustice.ca)

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